

Assateague Island

Assateague Island National Seashore
Maryland and Virginia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The National Seashore

Assateague Island is a barrier island built by sand that persistent waves have raised from the ocean's gently sloping floor. Constant reshaping mirrors a restless origin, as steady winds continue moving trillions of sand grains, each a bit of eroded ancient Appalachian Mountains. Occasional storms drive waves and sands so forcefully that beach and shoreline change dramatically. But Assateague's summer mostly means the lure of beaches and mild surf where shorebirds trace the lapping waves back down the beach. Behind the dunes, the island's forests and bayside marshes invite exploration. Now and then a wild pony wanders into view. Assateague Island consists of three major public areas (see the map): Assateague Island National Seashore, managed by the National Park Service; Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and Assateague State Park, managed by Maryland's Department of Natural Resources. Assateague Island National Seashore is administered to provide for recreational use and enjoyment consistent with the maintenance and perpetuation of the seashore's natural communities. Together, these agencies hold in trust a priceless seashore heritage of wildlands, wildlife, and outdoor recreation. The Na-

tional Park Service operates visitor centers serving both the Maryland and Virginia ends of the island. Visitor centers are the places to find out about naturalist activities, among other things. The **Seashore Visitor Center** at the Maryland end (see map) features exhibits, an aquarium, and maps and other publications. A naturalist can answer your questions. **For information** about the seashore and visitor center seasons, hours, and fees, write or call: Superintendent, Assateague Island National Seashore, Route 2, Box 294, Berlin, MD 21811, (301) 641-1441.

Assateague State Park. The State of Maryland owns 680 acres of Assateague Island that it operates as a state park. Its beach offers separate swimming, surf fishing, and surf boarding areas. Ask about these at the state park entrance station (see map). Bathhouses, a bait and tackle shop, and food service facilities are open in summer, when lifeguards protect the beach. See Camping for information about the state park campground. **For information** about the state park, write or call: Superintendent, Assateague State Park, Route 2, Box 293, Berlin, MD 21811, (301) 641-2120.

Chincoteague

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge
Virginia

Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Snow geese

The Wildlife Refuge

The once-enormous waterfowl populations that migrated to the Delmarva region were dwindling at an alarming rate during the early 1900s. Wholesale conversion of wetlands to agriculture and private development, coupled with outlaw market gunning for food and plumage, threatened many bird species. The Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1943 as a resting and feeding area for the imperiled greater snow goose. The refuge is located on the Virginia end of Assateague Island and was purchased with Duck Stamp revenues. The Chincoteague refuge's prime Atlantic flyway habitat is essential to the survival of birds whose hereditary migrational instincts take them annually north and south on sometimes incredible seasonal journeys. Refuge management programs actively enhance this coastal habitat for the benefit of migratory and nesting birds and indigenous wildlife. The primary function of the refuge is to protect native and migratory species of wildlife and their habitat. The refuge is open to recreational uses centered around wildlife and wildland activities that are in harmony with this primary objective. Birdwatchers know the Chincoteague refuge as one of the East's finest places to add sightings to their life lists. Whitetail deer and the small Sika

deer, an oriental elk released here in 1923, also inhabit its pine forests in the island's interior. The **Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Center** at the Virginia end (see map) provides information, descriptive leaflets, and schedules for interpretive activities, including guided walks and auditorium programs. A concessioner operates a series of wildlife and boat tours. You may make reservations for the tours at the visitor center. The access road off Beach Road is also the entrance to the Wildlife Drive (see map). **For information** about the refuge and visitor center seasons, hours, and fees, write or call: Refuge Manager, Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, P.O. Box 62, Chincoteague, VA 23336, (804) 336-6122. The National Park Service assists the Fish and Wildlife Service in providing services and managing recreational use in the Toms Cove area at Assateague Island's Virginia end. The **Toms Cove Visitor Center** offers exhibits and maps and other publications. For information about National Park Service naturalist or beach recreation activities there, call (804) 336-6577.

Treasures at the Atlantic's Edge

Birding

Although birds are found in good numbers throughout Assateague, the serious birder will usually find more opportunities in the Virginia portion of the island. Scoters, oldsquaws, and other sea ducks—normally well off shore in winter—can sometimes be seen in Toms Cove or Assateague Channel. The many species of waterfowl include black duck, wigeon, mallard, scaup, goldeneye, bufflehead and snow geese. Terns dive for fish, and gulls and sandpipers work the

entire Assateague shoreline. Beyond the primary dune are birds you would encounter in thickets and pine forests on the mainland. Watch for the endangered peregrine falcon. The refuge's freshwater impoundments combine with the marshes all along Assateague to host a variety of herons, egrets, and other wading birds. Ask at any visitor center for a checklist of the island's birds.



Great blue heron



Snowy egret



Dunlins



American widgeon



Black-crowned night heron



Peregrine falcon

William S. Seegar

Backcountry Camping

There are several backpack and canoe-access campsites on the island's Maryland end, each with a chemical toilet and picnic table but no drinking water. There is no fee. The three ocean side sites are open year-round and are available to hikers. The four bay side camps are available March 1 to October 31 and may be used by hikers or canoeists. Ocean sites are in open inner-dunes; bay sites sit among pine trees. Reservations are not necessary but parking and backcountry

use permits are required. The nearest ocean side camp is 4 miles from parking. Write for free "Assateague Backcountry Camping" information at the national seashore address.

Camping



Seashore camping can be a memory to treasure—or a bad experience for the unprepared. There is no shade and mosquitoes can be abundant from mid-May to October. High winds can pull short tent pegs out of sand. Campgrounds at the Maryland end can be full in summer and waiting lists are used. For detailed information, write to the national seashore for free "Assateague Island Camping" literature. There is no camping on the wildlife refuge, which includes the entire Virginia end of the island.

There are commercial campgrounds, usually with adequate space, on nearby Chincoteague Island: Call Virginia's State Travel Service, (804) 825-5000, for information. It is a 50-mile, 1.5-hour drive on mainland roads (recommended route shown in blue on map) from one end of Assateague Island to the other. Maryland's Pocomoke River State Park campground is a 45-minute drive from either end; call (301) 632-2566.

Naturalist Activities

Programs to enhance your enjoyment of the island's environment and unique recreation opportunities are offered at both the national seashore and the wildlife refuge. The **National Park Service** offers guided walks, talks, children's programs, and seashore recreation demonstrations daily in summer and on weekends in fall and spring. Guided walks include explorations of Assateague's birdlife, the beach, salt marshes, the bay, and dunes. Demonstrations include surf rescue and

surf fishing. Clamming, crabbing, and canoe trips are available in Maryland. Check at the Seashore and Toms Cove Visitor Centers for schedules of programs at the island's Maryland and Virginia ends. The **Fish and Wildlife Service** offers guided programs exploring the refuge's birdlife, other wildlife, marshes, and the dynamics of a barrier island. There are also children's programs. For some programs you must first sign up at the Chincoteague Refuge Vis-

itor Center. Check there for schedules of all activities and auditorium programs, or to make reservations for wildlife boat and "Safari" bus tours offered by a concessioner. Wildlife work by various artists is exhibited summer weekends in the historic U.S.C.G. lighthouse oil shed, reached by a short walk on the Lighthouse Trail. Each year the wildlife refuge holds an open house during Waterfowl Week, generally around Thanksgiving, when large numbers of

migratory birds use the refuge. Ask at the Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Center for specific dates for this year's Waterfowl Week.

The Official National Park Handbook, *Assateague Island*, tells about this barrier island's natural history of ponies, pirates, and shipwrecks. It walks you through the beach, dune, salt marsh, and bay environments with the author, world-renowned marine biologist William H.

Amos. The traveler's guidebook section describes nearby accommodations and services, as well as recreation and nature activities on the island itself. The handbook is available at visitor centers.

Wild Ponies



Two herds of wild ponies make their homes on Assateague Island. The herds are separated by a fence at the boundary between Maryland and Virginia. In Maryland, horses are often seen around roads and campgrounds. In Virginia, look for them in marshes off the Pony Trail observation platform. The Maryland herd is managed by the National Park Service. The Virginia herd is owned by the Chincoteague Volunteer Fire Company and allowed by permit to graze on Chincoteague refuge. Each year ponies from the Virginia herd are rounded up and many of the foals are sold at the Pony Penning and auction, held on the last Wednesday and Thursday of July. Proceeds from the pony auction help support the fire company. Today's wild ponies on Assateague Island are descended from domesticated stock that was grazed on the island as early as the 17th century by Eastern Shore planters. The planters grazed their horses here to avoid mainland taxes and fenc-

ing requirements. Smaller than horses, these shaggy, sturdy ponies are well adapted to their harsh seashore environment. Marsh and dune grasses supply the bulk of their food; they obtain water from freshwater impoundments or natural ponds. Their social organization, behavior, and communication habits are explained in publications available at visitor centers. Although domestic in their distant origins, these ponies are wild today. Respect them as such and view them only from a safe distance. While usually appearing docile, they are prone to unpredictable behavior and can inflict serious wounds both by kicking and by biting. **Do not feed or pet the ponies.**

©GPO: 1988-201-041/80035 Reprint 1988

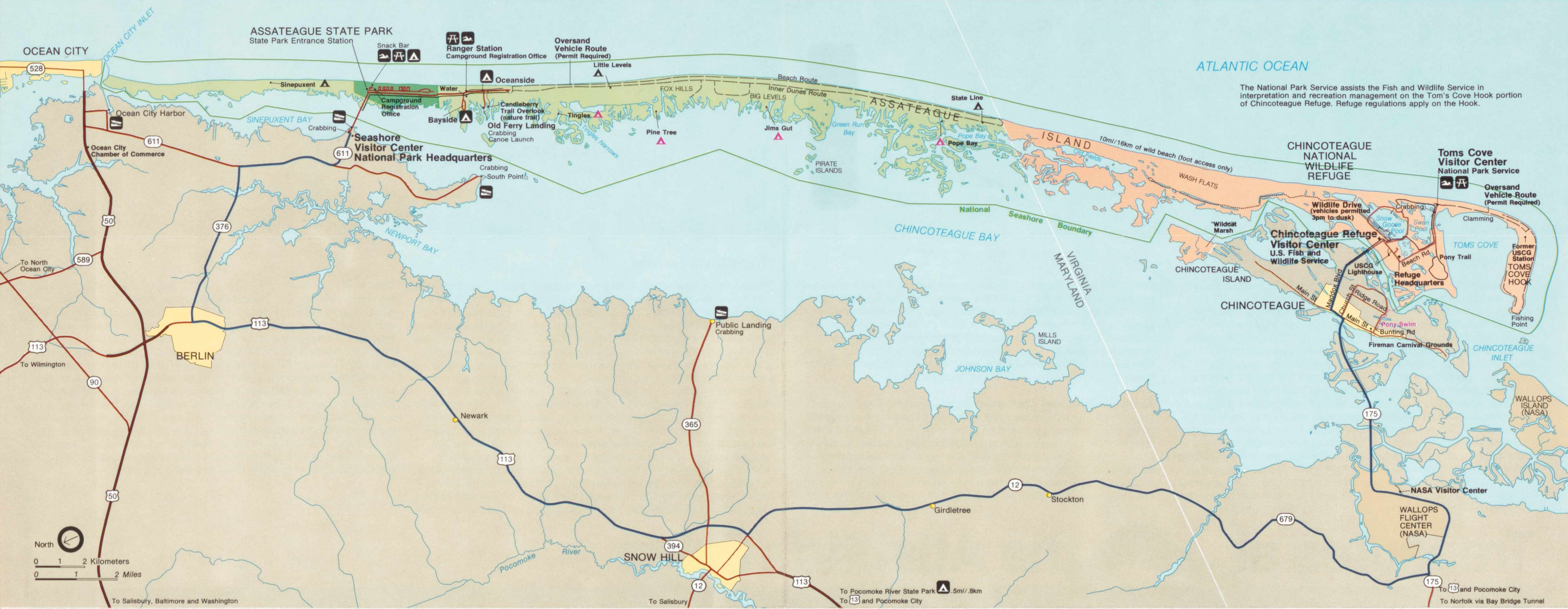
Map and Guide

Lifeguards and Swimming Safety

National Park Service Lifeguards supervise the North Beach and Toms Cove area beaches nearest the bathhouses in summer only. The state park also has summer lifeguard operations. Mats and floats, except U.S.C.G.-approved personal flotation devices, are prohibited

at lifeguarded beaches. Elsewhere they should be used only by expert swimmers. Mats and floats provide a false sense of security to the poor swimmer, and seashore drownings have been related to these devices. They can deflate, or the occupant can be knocked

off by a wave. See the bathhouse exhibits for important information on the purpose of lifeguard flags and the dangers of stinging marine organisms, heavy surf, or undertow currents.



Facilities at Lifeguarded Beaches

Maryland end. Next to the day-use parking lot is a bathhouse with rinse-off showers, changing stalls, toilet facilities, and drinking water. Picnic tables are nearby. The boardwalk from the parking lot to a dune overlooking the beach is

traversable by wheelchair. The state park also has a picnic area and bathhouse facilities. During the summer, a state park concessioner sells food and drink. **Virginia end/Toms Cove area.** Near main parking lots are bathhouses with

rinse-off showers, changing stalls, toilet facilities, and drinking water. Picnic tables are located nearby. No food or drink is sold at this end of the island. Wheelchair access is available to all facilities of the lifeguarded beach.

The 50-mile distance between the north and south ends of the island takes about 1½ hours to drive. We recommend the route shown in blue on the map.

- Recommended travel route
- Oversand vehicle route (permit required)
- Hiking trail
- Hiker/Biker trail

- Public campground
- Campsite: backpack in only
- Campsite: backpack or canoe in
- Picnic area
- Boat launch
- Lifeguarded beach

Enjoying the Seashore World

Surf Fishing

Ask at a visitor center for fishing information and regulations. Naturalists present surf fishing demonstrations in summer for anglers new to ocean fishing. No saltwater license is required for surf fishing along this coast. Fishing is prohibited on lifeguarded beaches or in designated surfing zones. On the island's Virginia end an overnight fishing permit is required between 10 p.m. and sunrise; ask at the Toms Cove or Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Centers.



Oversand Vehicle Use

Off-road vehicle (ORV) zones are posted and maps are available at national seashore and refuge headquarters. ORVs must stay on marked oversand vehicle routes. **All sand dunes and vegetated areas are closed, even those within a designated ORV zone.** Vehicles in ORV zones must properly display a valid permit. ORV permits are issued at the national seashore or refuge during normal business hours. Permits may also be obtained by mail. A fee is charged for

all permits. Vehicle specification and equipment requirements for ORVs are strictly enforced. Limits are placed on the number of vehicles allowed on the beach at any one time. Write to the national seashore or wildlife refuge for information and requirements before bringing an ORV here for use.

Clamming, Crabbing, and Shell Collecting



Clamming is best at the island's Maryland end. The favored method here is raking while wading in the generally shallow bay, but use caution for deep water. Crabbers in Maryland or Virginia commonly use a crab net and baited line. Crabs must measure 5 inches from point to point in Maryland. As a conservation measure we recommend the same size in Virginia. Few wild oysters are found around Assateague, and you may not trespass on leased oyster beds. Ask at



visitor centers for information on shell-fishing and best locations. Assateague is not generally known for good shell collecting. The most productive beaches are on the southern tip of Toms Cove Hook in Virginia, or at the extreme northern end in Maryland. Shells may not be sold or otherwise used for commercial purposes. Limit collections to those shells you can carry in a one-gallon container on any one visit.

Canoeing and Boating



Chincoteague Bay waters are ideal for canoeing at the Maryland end. Four canoe-in campsites are located there (see Backcountry Camping). Use the canoe launch at the end of Ferry Landing Road. Be aware of wind forecasts and get off the water during thunderstorms. Each occupant must have a personal flotation device. Canoe rentals are several miles away and you must haul them to launch sites. Rent boats with motors in Chincoteague or Ocean City. Chincoteague Island has a boat ramp for public use. Large boats at the island's Maryland end should use West Ocean City or state park

launch facilities on the mainland. The bay is generally shallow; boat operators should watch for sandbars. **Wildlife refuge regulations prohibit landing a boat anywhere on the island's Virginia end** other than at Fishing Point and designated areas on Toms Cove Hook. Boats and flotation devices of any kind are prohibited in pools on the wildlife refuge.

Hiking and Bicycling

Hiking. At the island's Maryland end short, self-guiding hikes are available on the state park's Oceanic Trail and the national seashore's Candleberry Trail. You can take longer hikes north to Ocean City Inlet or south on the ORV inner-dune road. At the Virginia end you can hike the refuge's Wildlife Drive, which is reserved for hikers and bicyclists until 3 p.m. each day. The Pony Trail is usually a good place to see ponies. Beach hikers can go to the southern end of Toms Cove Hook or enjoy miles of undisturbed beach north of the Toms Cove Visitor Center.

Bicycling. On the refuge a bike trail leads from the town of Chincoteague to the Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Center, circles Wildlife Drive, and continues to the National Park Service's Toms Cove Visitor Center. The Pony Trail is also open for bikes. On summer weekends all parking areas along the ocean here may be filled, so bicycling makes extra good sense then. Biking not only helps you avoid parking problems, but also



helps alleviate them. In Maryland, cyclists should use caution because they are restricted to busy roadways. The National Park Service hopes to begin construction of bike lanes in a few years.

Safety, Regulations, Pets, and Hunting

Safety concerns are described under specific topics in this folder. Read these entries carefully. General safety and management regulations follow:

Water Safety and Seashore Hazards. Use the lifeguarded beaches. Mats and tubes are prohibited on lifeguarded beaches and discouraged elsewhere (see Lifeguards and Swimming Safety). Treat breaking surf waves with respect; dislocated shoulders and sand abrasions are not uncommon. **EVEN BROKEN NECKS AND PARALYSIS HAVE RESULTED FROM RIDING THE WAVES IN SOME FASHION AND BEING THROWN INTO THE SAND HEAD FIRST.** Get off the beach during lightning storms. Overexposure to sun causes heat exhaustion and/or severe sunburn. Barefeet can be hurt by shells, glass, or hot coals left in the sand. Do not approach ponies closely. They can bite and kick, inflicting severe injuries.

Driving and Parking. Drive very slowly! Campgrounds, parking lots, and popular

crabbing areas are crowded with backing cars, bicycles, and children darting between parked vehicles. Follow at a safe distance. Do not stop your car suddenly or block traffic to watch ponies. Park only in designated areas, whether at campgrounds, developed beaches, or other areas. In Virginia, demand often exceeds available parking space on summer weekends.

Hours of Operation. The wildlife refuge in Virginia closes from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. April through October and from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. the rest of the year. Overnight surf fishing is allowed; a special permit is required (see "Surf Fishing"). There is no closing time in Maryland but overnight stays are permitted only by campers in designated campgrounds or backcountry campsites or by surf fishermen. No permit is required for overnight surf fishing in Maryland.

Pets. Please leave pets at home. They are prohibited in Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, in Assateague State Park, in the primitive area north of the

state park, and in all backcountry campsites. Pets are permitted elsewhere on the Maryland end of the island, but they must be on leashes no more than 6 feet long. This regulation is enforced because dogs can disturb other people, ponies, and shorebirds that nest directly in the sand or in marsh grasses. Sand and salt spray are hard on the feet and eyes of dogs, and insects can further endanger their health here. Really, it's better to leave your pets at home.

Feeding Wildlife. It is illegal to feed the ponies, deer, or other wildlife. Ponies and other wild animals have adapted to natural food and must depend on it throughout the year if they are to stay healthy. Feeding by humans also encourages animals to stay around roads, where many are hit by cars each year.

Hunting. Hunting is strictly prohibited on the wildlife refuge except for annual seasons on Sika and whitetail deer and for waterfowl hunting in Wildcat Marsh

(see map). Contact refuge headquarters for details. In Maryland certain waterfowl and game species may be taken under state and federal regulations. Contact national seashore headquarters during September for information about hunting and for maps.

Poison Ivy, Mosquitoes, and Ticks. Guard against poison ivy, mosquitoes, and ticks—all abundant on Assateague Island in the summer. Three different species of ticks are found on Assateague Island: dog, lone star, and Northern deer (left to right). A tick bite may transmit various ailments. The Northern deer tick is known to carry Lyme disease. To avoid getting bitten, stay on trails, use commercial repellents, and inspect yourself carefully if you walk through grass or brush. Inquire at the visitor centers or campground office for additional information.

